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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to create interdisciplinary study at one college, a gender and communications class was created by professors from psychology and communications. Although the class was made-up of students who were white, middle-class, and heterosexual, the class attempted to discuss issues about race, class, ability, and sexual preference differences through the use of class readings and films. It consisted of lectures, discussions, workshops, and student presentations. Guest speakers added additional information and perspectives. Students were able to evaluate the course and instructors on two forms: the college's standard form and an open-ended questionnaire designed for the course. The pooled results of these evaluations are presented in table form. Several suggestions emerged for the course in the future. Increasing the number of credit hours offered for this type of course would allow more time to cover each subject. An inclusion of a gay and lesbian perspective would help reduce the heterosexual bias. Strategies are also needed to help avoid digressions and tangents by students. (JDM)

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# CREATING A GENDER AND COMMUNICATION COURSE

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## I. Creating the Course

A. ***Rationale***:

Our College is interested in increasing interdisciplinary study on our campus. Our shared interest in gender issues led us to create this course. There was significant student interest in this class and it quickly enrolled to capacity (30 students.) Most of the students in class were of traditional college age, although we had six non-traditional students. Most of the students were women, with only three men enrolled. Only two African-American students were enrolled (a married couple!) with the remaining students appearing to be non-Latino Caucasians.

Some individuals at our college ascribe to the myth that team-teaching is a way for instructors to earn full pay for doing half the normal workload of a course. For us, this myth was quickly dismissed by our need to engage in twice the normal preparation time and organizational struggle that occurs when creating a course. But it also meant twice the creativity, twice the impact on student learning, and twice the intellectual rigor.

**1. <u>Integration of Perspectives</u>**: Integration was challenging—both psychology and communications contain huge bodies of literature and multiple theoretical perspectives regarding gender. Careful planning was needed to

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determine which topics would be presented and the presentation style that would be used. We met several times before beginning the semester to organize the course, select reading and to discuss how we would approach lecture and discussion. We grappled with ways to meet our disciplinary needs and to find texts that would help each of us to provide our own perspectives. We also met weekly before and after class to discuss plans, make revisions, and discuss successes and failures. We found frequent meetings to be invaluable.

We attempted to allocate specific presentation times to each instructor or guest speaker to ensure that all perspectives and teaching styles were adequately represented—this was an imperfect method for promoting integration of perspectives. We found we never had enough time to adequately cover each topic. In the future we would, ideally, increase the number of credit hours offered for this course to provide us with more time. At a minimum, however, we would plan to schedule this course differently—two 75-minute meetings per week as opposed to one 2.5 hour block—in order to maximum class time.

**2. Multicultural Perspectives:** We continually reminded our students (and ourselves) that we are white, middle-class, heterosexual women who bring particular biases to the study of gender. We engaged the class in repeated discussion of these issues and attempted to highlight important race, class, ability, and sexual preference differences through class readings and films.

**3. Men's Studies Perspectives:** We wanted to make this course a balanced "gender" class (as opposed to a purely woman-centered class) by including an examination of research on men and masculinity. We felt it would be difficult to accomplish this goal with two female instructors. Thus, we included readings from men's studies and invited a panel of three men who are gender scholars to participate in class discussion in order to provide some male perspective to the course.

***B. Readings***

1. Required Text: Bate, B. & Bowker, J. (1999). Communication and the sexes, 2nd edition. New York: Harper & Row.

   ***This text was used to provide a basic overview of key research findings and theoretical perspectives regarding gender and communication. We found the text to be inadequate for our needs—too little coverage in some areas, too much in others. Next time, we will probably skip using a text in favor of a collection of articles.***

2. Articles Placed on Library Reserve:

   - Bem, S. L. (1993). The construction of gender identity. From The lenses of gender. New Haven, CT: Yale. ***This article was chosen to introduce the constructivist psychological perspective regarding gender. Students found this reading to be reasonably accessible and to provide a good background information.***

- Brod, H. (1992). The case for men's studies. In H. Brod (Ed.), The making of masculinities. New York: Routledge. ***An excellent introduction to men's studies. Provides a clear rationale that details the benefits of scholarly research that focuses on men and masculinity.***
- Cameron, B. (1983). Gee, you don't seem like an Indian from the reservation. In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldua (Eds.). This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Press. ***A reading designed to provide students with a Native American woman's perspective of how race, class, and gender intersect to affect experience and behavior.***

- hooks, b. (1995). Killing rage: Militant resistance. Killing rage: Ending racism. New York: Owl Books. ***This reading provides an African-American woman's perspective on race, class, and gender, and presents a wholly different (and angrier!) response to oppression.***
- Lips, H. M. (1991). Power: Its many faces. From Women, men, and power. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield. ***This reading was assigned to introduce students to the theoretical perspective that gender differences are predominantly a function of differences in power and status. Several students indicated that they found this reading to be redundant to the text.***
- Pleck, J. H. (1992). The theory of male sex-role identity: Its rise and fall, 1936 to the present. In H. Brod (Ed.), The making of masculinities. New York: Routledge. ***This reading was assigned to further explicate a men's studies perspective. We felt that it was generally less useful to students than was Brod's "The case for men's studies."***
- Truth, S. (1851/1995). Ar'n't I a woman? In A. Kesselman, L. D. McNair, & N. Schniedewind (Eds.). Women's images and realities: A multicultural anthology. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield. ***Nothing is better than this short, classic piece for illustrating how culture, class, and race influence the construction and lived reality of gender.***
- West, C. & Zimmerman, D. H. (1992). Doing gender. In J. Bohan (Ed.), Seldom seen, rarely heard: Women's place in psychology (pp. 379-403). Boulder, CO: Westview. ***This is a complex article that challenged students, but we found ourselves returning again and again to the distinctions the authors make between sex, sex category, and gender. This article was especially relevant to our discussion of the film Ma Vie en Rose, in which a young boy tries to become a girl.***
- Yamada, M. (1983). Invisibility is an unnatural disaster: Reflections of an Asian American woman. In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldua (Eds.), This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Press. ***This reading was designed to present yet another multicultural viewpoint. Students were intrigued by the variety of reactions and coping methods adopted by women of color.***

*C. Grading*

Each instructor graded every poster session using a "Poster Evaluation Scale" and then the grades were averaged to produce the final project grade. All other assignments were graded individually—students who registered under a "COM" designation were graded by Karen Smith, and students who were under a "PSY" designation were graded by K. Crowley-Long. This was obviously not an issue for the multiple choice tests, but was somewhat problematic for the workshop, paper, visual presentation, and essay assignments. To ensure fairness, we met after each instructor completed an initial review of her students' work and then criteria were discussed together and a rubric was developed for scoring each assignment. We generally were able to reach a high-level of agreement regarding grading procedures and we received few complaints. A couple of students complained, however, that they had wanted to receive feedback from both professors on all assignments, but that would seem to be enormously time-consuming for so many different assignments.

**II. Managing Class Time**

A. ***Lecture*** – We tried to divide presentation time evenly, sometimes alternating classes, and sometimes dividing each class period into segments that would be led by a particular instructor—but it was difficult to find balance. Whoever went first often ended up getting most of the time because students and the instructor would get caught up in pursuing key ideas or examples. Our class was very engaged and active, and sometimes took us in directions we did not plan on going in. Our experience has led us to believe that this is always going to be a difficult problem to solve, but better balance is likely to occur as we gain increasing experience in the classroom with each other.

B. ***Discussion and Activities*** – It was not difficult to generate discussion in this class. Students were very engaged and eager to share their experiences with the class. A number of in-class group exercises also were used to engage students. For example, students were asked to form groups and examine magazines, newspapers, or children's books for gender stereotypes by counting the number of men, women, boys, girls, whites, and minorities that appeared in each medium. Students enjoyed this exercise enormously. In another exercise, students were asked to consider the questions: "What is oppression? Have you ever been oppressed? If so, how? How can one group oppress another?" On another day, students were asked to engaged in role playing of randomly assigned conflict styles and to relate them to gender.

C. ***Guest speakers*** – We invited four guest speakers to our class: one psychologist who is an expert on romantic relationships between women and men, and three men who engage in scholarship in men's studies. Students generally enjoyed the presentations made by these speakers and felt they added valuable information to the course. In the future, we would invite additional guest

speakers who could, for example, provide greater diversity of perspective regarding issues of race, class, disability, and sexual preference.

D. ***Films*** – We used two full films and several film or television clips to highlight key points in the course.

- ***Ma Vie En Rose/My Life in Pink* (French, subtitled). *This film explores how families, friends, and society react to a young boy who emphatically wants to be a girl. Students loved this film and we found it to be a very useful tool for exploring what gender is and how it works in society.***
- ***Dream Worlds II – An exploration of how women are depicted in MTV videos, and how men are affected by those depictions. Students saw a part of this video and found it to be moderately effective in influencing their views of MTV.***
- ***Stand By Me – We used this video to highlight the dynamics of friendships among boys and to examine how boys talk and think about women and girls. This was a very well received video among our students.***
- ***The Color Purple – We used a clip of this film to highlight one reaction by women of color to multiple oppressions. The scene we used depicted the main character's "killing rage" against her husband and was used in conjunction with belle hook's first chapter in her book Killing Rage. This clip would have been more effective if we had time for the entire film and had included other videos about the experiences of women in other minority groups (e.g., perhaps The Joy Luck Club).***

## III. Student Opinions and Suggestions

Students were given the opportunity to evaluate the course and instructors on two separate forms: The College's standard Teacher/Course Evaluation form and an open-ended questionnaire designed by us. Students who enrolled under the PSY (psychology) designation evaluated Kathleen Crowley-Long on the College's standardized form, whereas COM (communications) registrants evaluated Karen Smith. The pooled results of these evaluations are presented in Table 1. The procedures used to administer and analyze the College's form were designed to satisfy the College's administrative requirements. The open-ended questionnaire was designed entirely by us and addressed issues relevant only to the content of the course. A sample of student responses to each open-ended item is presented in Table 2.

**Table 1.**

**Summary of Responses to College Standardized Form (n=26)**
(Five point Likert-type scale, where 1=Strongly Agree – 5=Strongly Disagree)

| Question | Mean | sd |
|---|---|---|
| I gained an increased understanding of the subject. | 1.58 | 0.49 |
| The course content was relevant to course objectives. | 1.58 | 0.57 |
| This course was intellectually challenging. | 1.65 | 0.73 |
| The required readings helped me to learn material. | 1.81 | 0.48 |
| Instructor was prepared. | 1.73 | 0.76 |
| Instructor specified course objectives. | 1.85 | 0.91 |
| Instructor graded according to clear standards. | 2.00 | 1.00 |
| Instructor organized the material well. | 1.96 | 1.06 |
| Instructor displayed interest in subject. | 1.54 | 0.80 |
| Instructor returned papers in timely manner. | 1.54 | 0.75 |
| Instructor encouraged student participation. | 1.62 | 0.88 |
| Instructor was available outside of class. | 1.69 | 0.82 |
| Instructor explained subject clearly. | 1.88 | 1.09 |
| Instructor was willing to answer relevant questions. | 1.62 | 0.88 |

**Table 2.**

A sample of responses to questions on the open-ended evaluation form.

Q1 – In what ways was the text helpful to you in this course?

- Text was easy to read and presented good, real-life examples.
- I think journal articles were more helpful than the text.
- It made me realize really how gendered my life was and society is. The text was very boring.
- It helped me more with the communication end of things since I am more familiar with the psychology side.
- Personally I only read very little of the book. It appeared to be very dry.

Q2 – Which readings did you find most valuable in the course? Least valuable?

- The readings that were reviewed in class were helpful, but a few that were not reviewed were confusing.
- I found the text to be more valuable than the reserved readings. Some of them were a bit long and boring to read.
- I like the readings, especially the invisible woman and the ones that were more tale telling than professional jargon.
- The text and the first two articles on gender were the most valuable. The remainder of the articles I sometimes found confusing and they didn't

always go along with our text. It may have helped if they were discussed more.

- The reading on gender and culture were helpful in understanding gender. Those I found least valuable were the men's studies ones.
- I thought all the readings were good, but the first couple about gender sexuality gave a great comparison and broke down the differences about sex, sex category, & gender.

Q3 – Which films did you find most valuable in this course? Least valuable?

- My Life in Pink was valuable because it displayed the problems that most/some children face when developing and exploring their gender. The MTV Dream Worlds was also very good, graphic but good.
- I found the film about the gender confused boy very interesting. I did not feel that any of the films we viewed were lacking in value.
- The foreign film was effectively done with relevant gender issues. The MTV film was the least valuable to me.
- All of the films were valuable to me because although I had seen one of them previously, they were being viewed from a gender and communication point of view which gave fresh insight to the material.
- I liked the way different clips were used to illustrate different points (Stand By Me, The Color Purple.) I think all of the films helped to bring the subject to life.
- All of the films.

Q4 – What was your opinion about the guest lecturers in this course?

- I think they helped me gain an understanding of the topics they covered and also kept things interesting so the class wasn't the same every week.
- Wish the men's studies one was more formal—organized. Specific amount of time.
- I thought having lecturers (especially on men's studies) to be good. They presented new information and from a male's point of view. I think it gave the males an opportunity to present their point of view.
- I found it difficult to take notes on the panel discussion, but felt that the speakers were helpful.
- Boring. Bob was helpful with his lecture, but I feel the other 3 guests spoke about topics that weren't so much about gender, but a variety of topics.
- They were excellent. I wish they had gotten to talk more about their fields of interest, men's studies and gender instead of other things.

Q5 – Which class exercise did you find most valuable? Least valuable?

- I thought the posters were valuable. I haven't finished the gendered identity project yet, but what I have done has taught me a lot about my gender, and how hard it is to decide my exact gender. The workshop sounded great but combined with the poster, gendered identity and tests and a lot of reading, the workshop was too much!

- Most valuable was the poster session because it was interesting to see our own research and conclusions on nonverbal communications. I think the least valuable for me were some of the small group exercises. They were sometimes a little confusing.
- Most – poster and identity. Least – workshop.
- The most useful class exercise was counting the frequency of stereotypes in the newspaper and then discussing them with regard to other forms of print such as children's books, etc.. I found the information interesting and enlightening. The least useful was on conflict management and taking on the role of accommodating, etc.. I could anticipate the outcome from the reading.
- I felt the time spent on class exercises would have been better spent going over the material in greater detail.
- I like the group activities, this gave us a chance to get feedback from our peers.

Q6 – How fairly were the various perspectives regarding gender presented in this class? Are there any perspectives that you think need further development in future sections of this course?

- The perspectives regarding gender were presented very fairly. Everyone was treated equally.
- I think the various perspectives were fairly represented. This class was good, because I never thought about some of these issues before.
- I don't feel I learned that much as to how genders communicate with another. I've learned different types of gender and how gender is learned and how the media is.
- I think that given the predominantly female, heterosexual, white class that the other perspectives were fairly presented.
- I thought that gender was presented fairly. Like we discussed, as soon as we begin to talk about gender, stereotyping surfaces. This was a valuable lesson in awareness.
- Semi-fair—definitely need more ethnic perspectives, not just black/white.

Q7 – What activities or topics helped to promote an interdisciplinary perspective in this course? Which ones were least effective?

- The workshop paper promoted the interdisciplinary perspective the best, and using media (movie clips) also helped promote it. The least effective were some of the reserve readings because they were very focused on the psych. aspect.
- The way the topics were presented in the test and followed by your joint approach linked these together very well.
- I think overall it was the class discussion we had during every class. It helps to hear other peoples' perspectives and to let yours be heard. It may open up a whole new view of the topic area.
- In the beginning, each professor explained their approach to the course—one from communications and one from psychology. This

helped demonstrate how the two disciplines are connected and intertwined.

- Adding the media and psychological perspectives really made gender and how it is communicated evident in daily life, in TV, radio, newspapers, etc..

Q8 – What were the strengths and weaknesses of the team-teaching approach I this class?

- I liked the team teaching, but I feel that the grading should have been done by both professors.
- The strengths were two different subjects being taught at the same time, two opinions on subjects, always at least one professor in the class.
- I liked the team teaching because together there is a broader view of gender and communication rather than just one view being taught to us. I think a small weakness is that having two different ways of grading made it harder to know what was expected.
- I don't feel I head Karen teach as much as Dr. Crowley-Long. I feel at some times it was unorganized.
- I felt sometimes that it was not all tied together. I think this was because it was the first time it was ever taught this way. I did like it for the fact there were two different views and opinions.
- None—good dynamics between both instructors. Flexibility—give and take from both instructors was evident.

## IV. Conclusions

A. ***Our Reactions***:

- K. Crowley-Long – Team teaching is always an exciting and challenging prospect. I agree with those students who wrote that our presentations were sometimes disorganized and that adapting to two separate instructors is difficult, even if the instructors are very collegial and compatible. I also agree that the films we used were great, the poster session was very valuable, the visual presentation of gender identity was fun, class discussions were very often enlightening, our guest speakers were intriguing, there were too many readings, the tests were difficult, and that there was a lot of work in this class! We undoubtedly need to refine our syllabus—pare down the reading list, reorganize topics, and struggle to find ways to increase interdisciplinary integration in the classroom. Nevertheless, our first attempt at this course was successful, suggesting that subsequent revisions will be building upon a solid basis.
- K. Smith – Team teaching has been an insightful experience for me. Although some problems arose with organizing the material, adapting to the demands of two instructors, and grading, the benefits far outweighed these problems. Students' evaluations informed us that while team teaching offers a challenge, the struggle leads to increased learning. The readings and assignments, some of which will need refinement for future course offerings, offered a variety of perspectives, and the textbook needs to be eliminated with additional readings required to take its place. The

organizational structure of the course will need to be reexamined for more classroom fluency and inclusion of increased diversity, particularly on issues relevant to non-heteosexual biases, while we instructors will need to find more ways to integrate our interdisciplinary perspectives. In sum, although minor problems arose during the course, the course proved successful in its first run as an interdisciplinary course and provided a firm foundation for restructuring an even more successful course.

### *B. Suggestions for the Future*

- Eliminate use of required textbook.
- Expand existing selected articles/chapters list and use as the basis for all class discussion and assignments.
- Retain Poster Session, Visual Presentation of the Gendered Self, use of films (especially *Ma Vie en Rose)* and film clips, and in-class group activities.
- Expand guest speaker list to better represent diverse races, ethnicities, social classes, abilities, and sexual preferences.
- Refine and clarify workshop assignment.
- Reorganize topic list to improve structure of course and class lectures/discussions.
- Develop strategies to avoid digressions and tangents by students.
- Develop strategies to better coordinate interdisciplinary perspectives.
- Schedule class into two weekly sessions to take better advantage of class time. This approach would eliminate the need for breaks and would help to provide better time management by providing a natural time limit for each instructor.
- Increase inclusion of gay and lesbian perspectives to reduce heterosexist bias.